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TITLE: Claims-makers versus counter claims-makers: new sites of civic conflict in the construction and contestation of moral panic narratives through online newspaper discussion-threads.

YEAR: 2013

Publisher citation: MORRISON, J. 2013. Claims-makers versus counter claims-makers: new sites of civic conflict in the construction and contestation of moral panic narratives through online newspaper discussion-threads. In Scullion, R., Gerodimos, R., Jackson, D. and Lilleker, D. The media, political participation and empowerment. Abingdon, UK: Routledge [online], pages 142-157. Available from: https://www.routledge.com/

OpenAIR citation: MORRISON, J. 2013. Claims-makers versus counter claims-makers: new sites of civic conflict in the construction and contestation of moral panic narratives through online newspaper discussion-threads. In Scullion, R., Gerodimos, R., Jackson, D. and Lilleker, D. The media, political participation and empowerment. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, pages 142-157. Held on OpenAIR [online]. Available from: https://openair.rgu.ac.uk

Claims-makers versus counter claims-makers: new sites of civic empowerment in the construction, affirmation and contestation of moral panic narratives through online newspaper discussion-threads

Introduction

Much has been made in the literature on moral panics – scares about "a threat or supposed threat from deviants or 'folk-devils'" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, p.2) – of the role elite and/or expert "claims-makers" play in fanning the flames of popular hysteria (Cohen 1972). In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Ibid), Stanley Cohen's study of the furore surrounding the clashes between Mods and Rockers in early 1970s English seaside resorts, he popularised the idea that panics were generated and/or sustained not so much by the indisputable drama of authentic events but by the alarmist pronouncements of politicians, law enforcers, "moral entrepreneurs" such as residents' groups and community campaigners, and the news media. Hall et al (1978) took the claims-maker concept further in *Policing the Crisis*, by analysing the claims leading to an explosion of public concern about a purported spate of mugging by black youths, also in the early Seventies. They concluded that this (largely bogus) phenomenon was socially constructed by an alliance of "primary" and "secondary definers" – chiefly government ministers, judges, the police and journalists.

What these seminal texts share in common with numerous subsequent moral panic studies – from Fishman's (1978) ethnographic account of the "ideological" invention of a late Seventies youth "crime-wave" in Los Angeles to Golding and Middleton's classic (1982) deconstruction of broadly contemporaneous hyperbole surrounding a supposed

epidemic of welfare-sponging in Britain – is their focus on how claims enter the public sphere and are framed and contested principally through media discourse. But the claims-makers they identified and the sites of discourse they analysed were all highly traditional – with the result that the narratives they untangled were (perhaps inevitably for the times) almost wholly 'top-down' and 'unidirectional' in nature. Bluntly, they confined themselves to examining the social constructions contained in print and/or broadcast journalism produced by professional reporters and commentators, with access to in-the-know "elite" and/or "expert" claims-makers (Hall et al 1978). Moreover, these were constructions produced for public *consumption*. However "active" audiences themselves might have been in "decoding", even questioning, media narratives (Hall 1973), they were still conceived as precisely that: audiences. It was for media practitioners and their fellow definers - or "knowers" (Fishman 1980) - to set the *terms* of the discourse. Ultimately, all audience-members could do if they rejected or disbelieved particular narratives was buy different newspapers, switch channels, or yell impotently at their television screens.

In the majority of these 'classic' moral panic texts, written in a pre-Internet age, the news media is depicted as one of the most powerful "definers" – repeatedly aiding and abetting the suppression of "deviancy" by a hegemonic "control-culture" (Hall et al 1978), and thereby masking the true nature and causes of deep-rooted and complex social problems. But while this charge might just as easily be levelled at the tabloid cheerleaders who egged on Prime Minister David Cameron in his crusade to tackle the "moral collapse" of England's "120,000 troubled families" (Cameron 15 August 2011) following the August 2011 riots, it is less clear-cut how hegemonic, or even elite-driven, these narratives now are, in light of the increasing democratisation of today's claims-making – through the transformative influence of 24-hour news channels, mobile digital platforms,

citizen journalism and, especially, social media. In an age when newspapers routinely invest more time and money in online content than print – and firsthand accounts of news 'events', from the popular uprisings of the 'Arab Spring' to images of hooded looters fleeing flaming buildings during the riots, are as likely to be generated by 'audience-members' as media professionals – tools like Twitter and Facebook are empowering every one of us to become claims-makers. At the same time, 'deviants' can harness this technology to challenge mainstream narratives and norms. Whether by posting counter-claims on *Daily Mail* discussion-boards, convening their own sub-cultural forums or, indeed, using BlackBerry's free encrypted messaging service to coordinate raids on shops and businesses, today's folk-devils can "fight back" (McRobbie and Thornton 1995) – and, by extension, help *shape* media discourse.

The best of the earlier studies did, of course, make some effort to test the claims of elite claims-makers against the experiences of the public. Cohen mingled with tourists and locals in Brighton to observe their responses to the exaggerated tales of Mod-versus-Rocker mayhem carried in the town's evening paper, the *Argus*. Golding and Middleton analysed various 'grassroots' sources, including opinion-poll findings, to gauge actual public perceptions of the nature and scale of benefit-scrounging. And Hall et al devoted a chapter to examining the reactions of news audiences to the early 1970s mugging "crisis" as mediated by newspaper letters pages and threatening missives sent to convicted muggers and their families (Hall et al 1978, pp.124-6 and 133-4 respectively). More recent studies of media-fuelled juvenile panics – from Valentine's extensive efforts to illuminate parental anxieties about perceived extra-familial threats like 'stranger-danger' (1996a) to Kitzinger's (1999a) unravelling of misconceptions about links between homosexuality and paedophilia – have used focus-groups to explore to great effect the

complexities of how audiences interpret, process and respond to 'panicky' media narratives. Yet, in light of recent developments in the 'food-chain' of communications between sources, journalists and public, the use of terms like "media effects" and "audience reception" common to many such studies risks looking increasingly outmoded today.

In truth, since the mid-2000s the oft-cited "multimedia" landscape has become progressively more multidimensional, multidirectional and, by extension, democratised in its inputs and outputs than would appear from much of the literature. While news narratives continue to be constructed and framed by a cabal of professional journalists and their elite/expert sources – drawing their story ideas and angles from a "web of facticity" (Tuchman 1978) which rests on establishment ideas about newsworthiness – one only has to peruse the discussion-threads flowing from news items on mainstream newspaper websites, let alone the wider "blogosphere" (Castells 2008), to be confronted by a plurality of (sometimes authoritative) opinions on - and challenges to - these narratives. Amid the semi-literate rants clogging up message-boards on *www.dailymail.co.uk* there are glimpses of something else: the emergence of a new breed of 'citizen claims-maker' - and, crucially, counter claims-maker - as informed, articulate and (potentially) equipped to shape media narratives as the 'journalist-elite-expert' triumvirate of old.

Though some pre-Internet studies have much to tell us about the two-way nature of news discourse – lending ammunition to "active audience" theories on the one hand (Klapper 1960; Hall 1973), while providing circumstantial evidence for the present of media effects – they are each essentially rooted in an 'old' model, which positions the public as recipients/interrogators of claims made by other (better 'informed') individuals

and organisations. To date little has been done empirically to illuminate how citizens can be (and increasingly are) claims-makers themselves. In the multidimensional world of digital media it is now possible for even previously marginalised voices to gain an airing: for maverick claims-makers, or counter claims-makers, to reject the narratives constructed by mainstream forces and build their own. During the 2011 'Arab Spring' Twitter, Facebook and other social media outlets enabled suppressed citizens across North Africa and the Middle East to breach previously impregnable censorship barriers to find global audiences for their first-person testimonies (and footage). And it was a *Guardian* journalist's use of crowd-sourcing to obtain digital camera footage of a police assault on innocent passer-by Ian Tomlinson during the 2009 G20 protests that ultimately led to the manslaughter prosecution of a serving police constable (*www.bbc.co.uk*, June 18, 2012). Similarly, recent attempts to demonise or "other" (Mooney 2009) groups and individuals who react against or question the norms of mainstream society, ranging from the rioters to the anti-capitalist protestors who set up camp outside St Paul's Cathedral two months later, have been met by powerful counter-claims from the supposed 'deviants' themselves (and evidence to support them, drawn not only from their own mobile phones but also the 'establishment's' CCTV cameras).

Taking note of the citizen claims-makers: towards a methodology

The power of social media to offer a platform for mainstream news narratives to be challenged by audiences is increasingly being recognised by academics. In *Virtual*

Ethnography (2000) Hine demonstrated how publicity surrounding the televised US trial of British nanny Louise Woodward for allegedly shaking a baby to death sparked a global online dialogue between citizens with a wide range of perspectives, including those campaigning for her release. But what has so far been lacking is sufficient empirical research into how the digital realm is being used to not only contest news narratives through argument and opinion but directly reject - even 'disprove' - them. In addition, while some attention has been paid to contributions by "alternative" voices to specialist discussion forums (Witschge 2005 and 2006), little effort has been made to analyse how subversive counter-narratives are also being constructed on mainstream news websites.

This chapter aims to start the process of exploring how discussion-threads on professional British newspaper sites are increasingly being used not only to comment on texts contrived by journalists but *contribute* to them (and, in some cases, construct *alternative* ones). Focusing on a selection of articles drawing on the simmering 'moral panic narrative' that arguably underpins much of the contemporary news discourse about children and teenagers, it uses virtual ethnography to isolate the (counter) claims-makers from the merely opinionated – in so doing, positioning audience-members as putative "opinion-leaders" (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955).

Methodology

The research for this chapter stemmed from a critical discourse analysis of articles about children published in the English print editions of all but four national newspapers during July 2011. Commencing on July 1 and ending on July 31, on every fifth day an analysis

was carried out of every article focusing on under 18-year-olds in the following mainstream newspapers: the *Sun*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Star*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, and *Independent*. The four newspapers omitted from the sample were the *Financial Times, i, Metro* and *Morning Star*. The *FT* was excluded because it is an essentially specialist title whose primary focus is the economy, and its coverage of other issues, including those concerning children, is unrepresentative of general news discourse. The *i* was omitted on the basis that most of its content appears simultaneously in its sister title, the *Independent*. The *Metro* was rejected because it is only distributed in certain locations – primarily public transport routes in and around urban centres – making it an unreliable litmus-test of narratives available on 'newsstands' throughout England. The *Morning Star* was excluded because of the erratic nature of its distribution and the relatively narrow focus of its news coverage. On the single Sunday when newspapers were sampled (31 July), all nine nationals were analysed: the *Observer, Independent on Sunday, Sunday Telegraph, Sunday Times, Mail on Sunday, Sunday Express, Sunday Mirror, Daily Star Sunday* and *People*.

The initial aim of the discourse analysis was to confirm the hypothesis that the dominant underlying portrayal of children in British newspapers positions them as either or both of potential prey and predator - or, to quote Valentine (1996a), "angels and devils". All articles focusing on children were extracted, before being divided into six categories: children as (potential) victims; children as (potential) threats; child survivors; child achievers/heroes; celebrity children; and other articles about children. The majority of articles were expected to fall into either or both of the first two categories: those presenting juveniles either as vulnerable to external dangers or as dangers themselves. To

address the question of whether/to what extent such narratives permeate to the provincial media, editions were also sampled of one local evening paper: the Brighton *Argus*.

The decision to analyse print newspaper editions enabled additional qualitative observations to be made about the framing of articles that would not have been possible had the analysis been carried out using a software package like LexisNexis. For example, it was possible to note how and where a given story was positioned on the printed page; whether it was accompanied by an image; and, if so, of what. Nonetheless, for clarity of recording and ease of replication it was necessary to rationalise final coding to six categories: type of article/section; page number and whether an article appeared on a 'facing' (oddly numbered) or 'non-facing' (even) page; headline wording; angle/phrasing of opening sentence/paragraph (intro); use of subjective/value-laden language in the article as a whole; and choice of sources (claims-makers). Though the primary focus was news stories – the papers' supposedly objective representations of 'factual' events and issues – other relevant articles were also analysed, including features and comment pieces.

As the ultimate research aim was less to analyse newspaper narratives themselves than illuminate the ways in which 'audience-members' help *shape* them by responding online, the 'live' reactions generated by articles on their accompanying discussion-threads/forums were also studied. It was necessary, though, to focus on particular framing devices used by the newspaper to the exclusion of others: while headline and intro wording, overall use of loaded language and journalists' choice of sources remained vital to analysing how articles were presented (and perceived) online, attributes that had a bearing on how items appeared in *print*, such as page numbers and positioning, became irrelevant. In focusing on intros and headlines, however, it was necessary to identify

subtle differences in phrasing between newspapers' print and online editions. Such variations were particularly noticeable in red-top tabloids like the *Sun*. A form of virtual ethnography was used to analyse reader comment posts. In this context, the term denotes the practice of capturing the 'life-cycles' of online reader debates about specific newspaper articles in order to better understand the process by which today's audiences both respond to news narratives and collaborate in their construction. To avoid distorting their dialogue, the approach adopted was that of "distanced" observer, rather than "involved" participant (Morton 2001).

Because of the focus on examining the construction and reception of 'juvenile panic' narratives, the virtual ethnography centred on the twin categories of article most relevant to this discourse: children as threat and children as victim. Each of the 324 articles falling under these headings was accessed online, but for obvious reasons it was only possible for audience input/responses to be analysed in relation to those for which comment-threads were provided. Therefore, the final virtual ethnography encompassed only 23 articles – just over 7% of the total bracketed in the above categories and barely 5% of the total number of juvenile-related pieces (463) identified on the seven dates on which the newspapers were analysed. The greater emphasis placed by certain papers on soliciting readers' views meant the sample contained a bias towards broadsheet/quality titles (notably the *Daily Telegraph* and *Independent*) and one particular mid-market tabloid (the *Daily Mail*), with the *Sun* – responsible for the biggest single 'news day' in relation to juvenile stories (July 6) – reserving its invitations to readers to post online reactions to a handful of longer pieces. The only articles listed in the relevant categories in the discourse analysis but purposely excluded from the virtual ethnography were those concerning allegations that reporters at the (by then defunct) *News of the World* had

hacked into the mobile phones of parents of murdered schoolgirls Milly Dowler, Sarah Payne, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. Although these articles reused 'iconic' photographs of the girls, their main emphasis was the abuse of vulnerable families by mercenary journalists rather than that of the children themselves by their killers. It was therefore felt that to have incorporated them into the analysis of online user responses to articles about children as victims/threats would have distorted the findings.

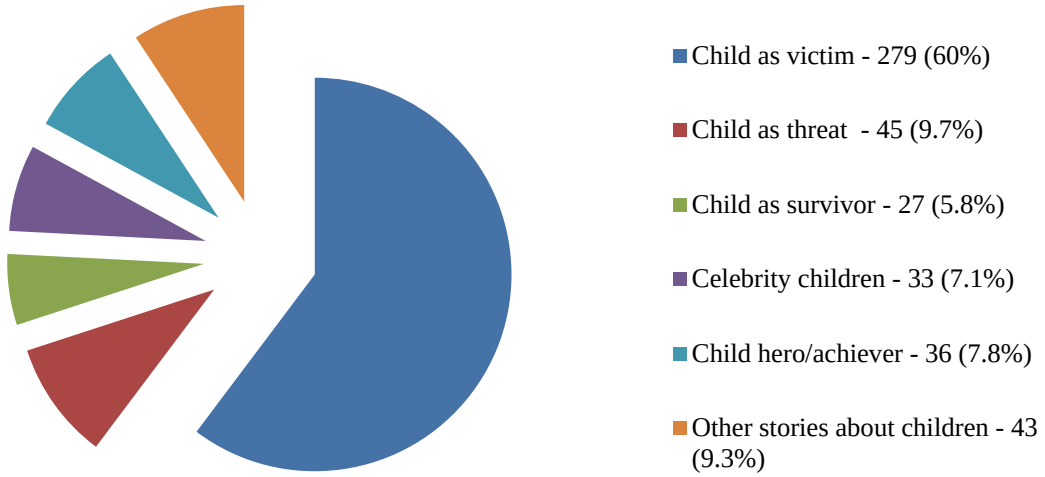
Given this chapter's emphasis on exploring how audience discussions are being used not only to respond to mainstream news narratives but to contribute to and/or dispute them, it was necessary for the 2,809 individual postings analysed for the virtual ethnography to be coded into two broad categories: straightforward *comments* (including those supportive of the articles' claims) and those representing *claims* - or *counter-claims* - themselves. The latter were posts in which audience-members either affirmed or contradicted the narrative underpinning an article based on their own asserted observations, experience(s) and/or 'expertise'. These claims-based comments were further coded into twin categories, modelled on the two principal types of audience response identified by Hall in 1973: "dominant" (supportive of the news narrative) and "oppositional" (against it). The oppositional posts – those taking issue with a given narrative based on the prior knowledge and/or experience of the poster – were further sub-coded into ones drawing on additional *information* about the subject of an article (including that which may have been obtained from secondary sources, such as books and/or other articles) and those explicitly citing *personal/vicarious experience* as the basis of their challenge to a journalist's discourse.

Research outcomes and analysis

Discourse analysis

As stated above, discourse analysis of the 63 national newspaper editions and six issues of the Brighton *Argus* carried out during July 2011 identified 463 articles focusing on under 18-year-olds. Of these 279 (60%) were classified in the 'children as victims' category and a further 45 (9.7%) under 'children as threats'. The initial hypothesis – that most articles would be bracketed in one of these ways – was therefore proven. The overall breakdown of articles across the month is given in Figure 1.1 below:

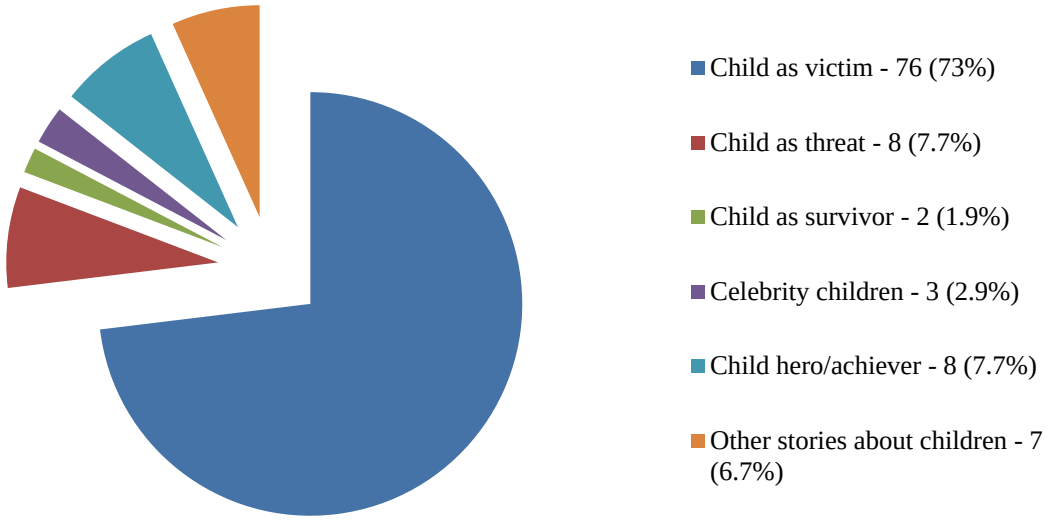
Figure 1.1 Breakdown of articles about children for July 2011 (463)



On the biggest 'news day' (July 6), 76 'child as victim' articles appeared (nearly three-quarters of the total) and eight (almost 8%) as threats. The breakdown for this single day

of newspaper coverage appears in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 Breakdown of articles for July 6, 2011 (104)



Breakdowns of article type for the newspapers featuring the most and fewest stories about juveniles – the *Sun* and *Guardian* respectively – and the *Argus* can be found in Figures 1.3 to 1.5 below.

Figure 1.3 Breakdown of types of juvenile articles in Sun (73)

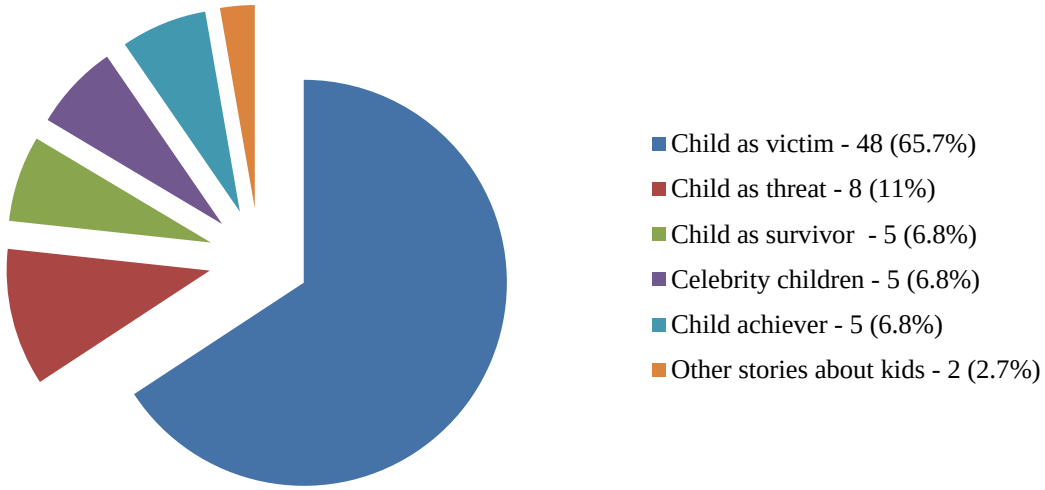


Figure 1.4 Breakdown of types of juvenile articles in Guardian (14)

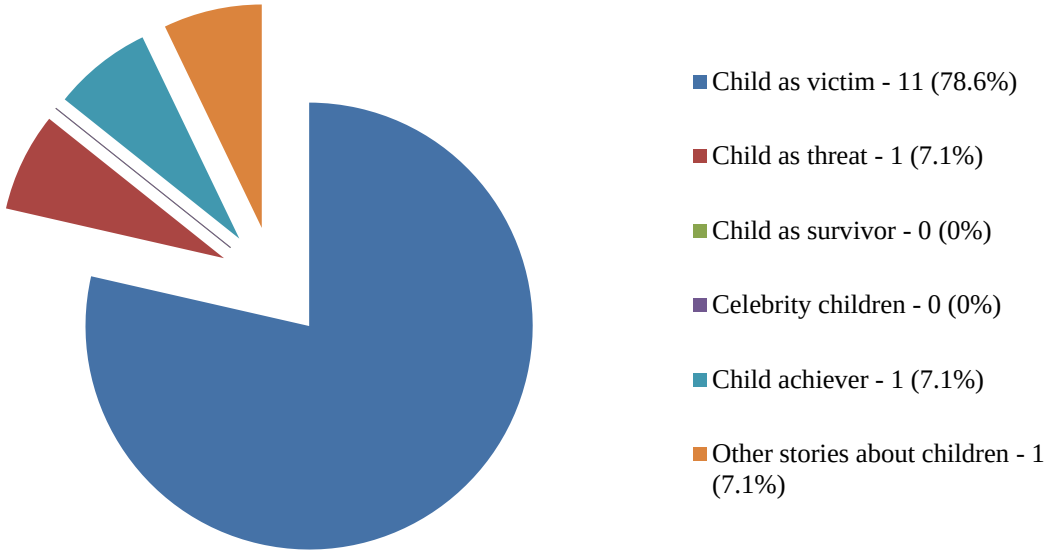
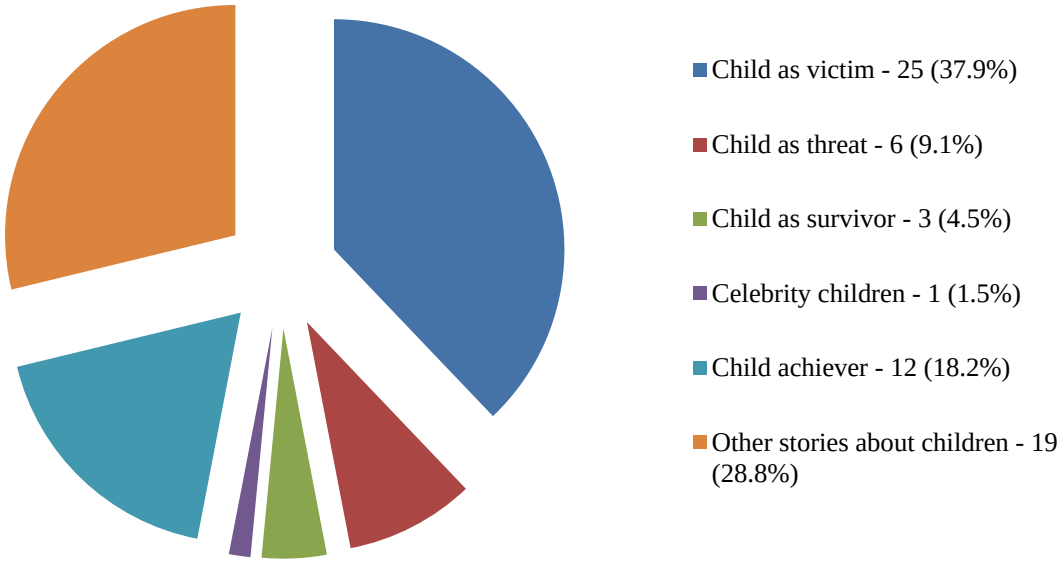


Figure 1.5 Breakdown of types of juvenile articles in Argus (66)



Victim and threat articles were divided into sub-categories, which can be seen in Figures 1.6 and 1.7.

Figure 1.6 Breakdown of threats *faced* by children (279)

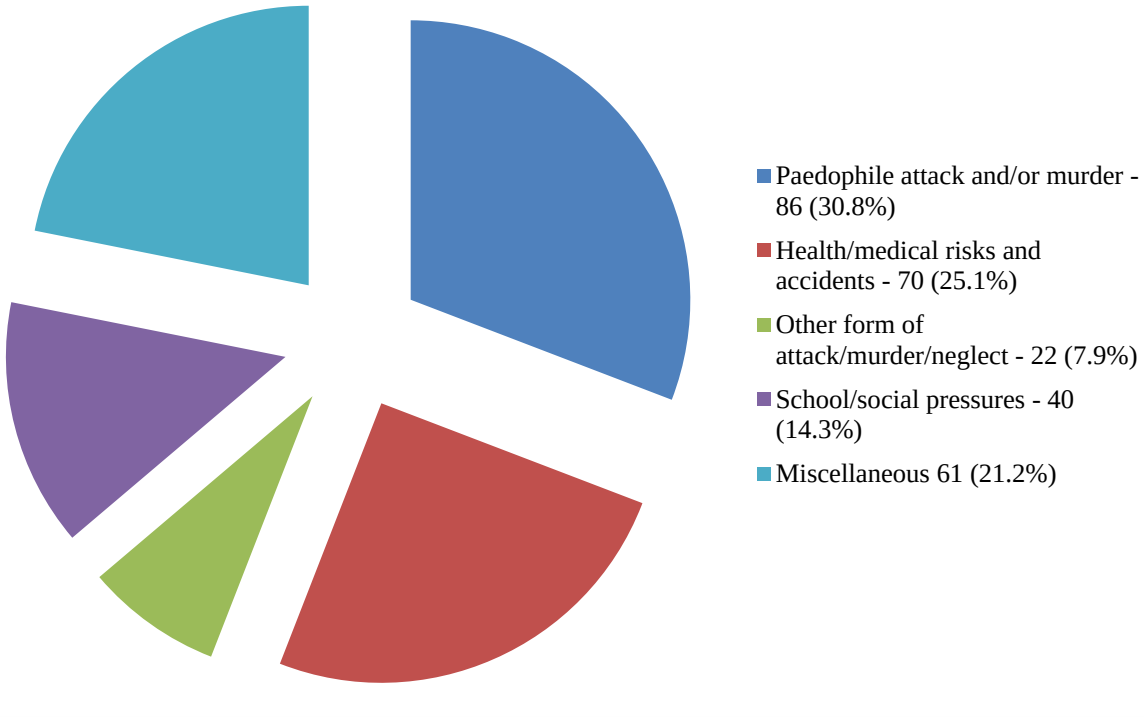
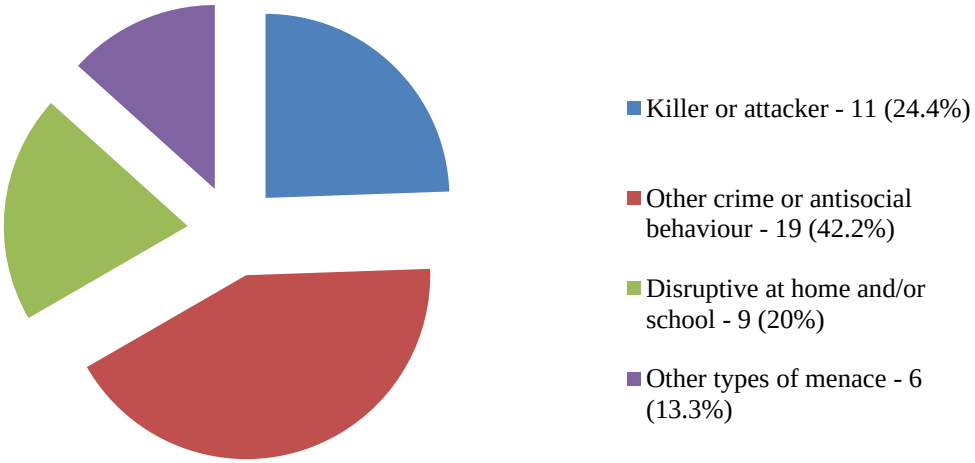


Figure 1.7 Breakdown of threats *posed by* children (45)



Nearly a third of all articles positioning children as victims (86 out of 279) concerned paedophile crimes, with a quarter (70) focusing on serious/fatal accidents, injuries or medical conditions. Other forms of attack/abuse, besides those of a sexual nature, accounted for another eight per cent (22 articles). Of those positioning children as threats, the highest portion (42.2%, or 19 out of 45) concerned non-violent criminal/antisocial behaviour, with nearly one in four (11) focusing on children as attackers/killers or issues relating to juvenile violence.

Virtual ethnography

Of the 2,809 posts coded, the overwhelming majority (2,244, or eight out of ten) were straightforward *reactions* to the articles beneath which they were posted. Most concurred with the editorial lines of the websites concerned - endorsing the angles/framing favoured by journalists - as one might expect from media-users who chose to visit particular sites instead of others (Iyengar and Kahn 2009). A common response to articles about unruly

children or, conversely, those who mistreat or abuse the young – the two sides of the underlying moral panic discourse bubbling beneath the surface of so many of the stories about juveniles to emerge from the discourse analysis - was one of disgust and/or outrage. The single comment posted beneath a July 6 *Sun* story headlined "Shy weeps as paedo stepdad freed early: abuse campaigner's fury" was typical in tone and content of most responses to sexual abuse cases. An audience-member using the alias "buffy71" wrote:

"This man should rot in jail, until the space reserved in Hell for him is ready for him to rot there, for what he did to Shy. The 'justice' system in the UK is far from its title."

Similarly, a lengthy July 11 article on the *Mail* website about the pregnant 15-year-old daughter of a welfare-dependent "mother-of-14" which positioned her children as, alternately, 'victims' of *her* deviancy and deviants themselves attracted 745 comments. Several readers condemned the woman's "breeding" habits ("Charlotte, Cape Town"; "J Thompson, Bangor"; "Cathy, West Yorkshire"), while others used the story as an excuse to launch into wider diatribes about the "underclass" ("deji, London"), choosing lurid language like "vermin" (Ibid) and "scroungers" ("Jane von M, the Netherlands") to describe the family. Similarly hot-tempered responses greeted articles focusing on 'deviant' school pupils ("Teachers will be allowed to use force on unruly pupils as ministers lift 'no-touching' ban", *www.dailymail.co.uk*, July 10, 2011) and a father who was prosecuted for warning fellow parents that his ex-wife's husband was a convicted paedophile ("Father fined £1,000 and found guilty of harassment for warning families about a paedophile", *www.dailymail.co.uk*, July 11, 2011).

However, given the preoccupation of this study with evidence of audience *claims-making*, rather than mere *reaction*, the responses of greatest interest were the one in five that went beyond endorsing or criticising articles' editorial lines to present additional/alternative information and perspectives with a bearing on the 'facts' reported. Although nearly six out of ten (327) of the 546 responses falling into this category amounted to *affirmative* (dominant) claims – personal testimonies from audience-members who claimed their own experiences/background knowledge supported an article's assertions – the remaining 40% (219) presented *oppositional* claims based on information/expertise contradicting newspapers' accounts. The significance of this small but vocal minority of informed counter claims-makers was amplified by the number whose challenges to journalists' narratives were based on claimed (insider) *experience* of a social phenomenon, rather than (outsider) *knowledge* about it. One in four of all counter-claims posted (87 in total) were based on their authors' assertions of personal or vicarious experiences /knowhow of direct relevance to narratives they were contesting. Of the remaining six out of ten (132) all that can be said for sure was that they each cited background knowledge (statistics, quotes and/or examples) contradicting journalists' narratives. Some of this knowledge might itself have been obtained firsthand, meaning a number of counter claims-makers who did not 'declare interests' explicitly – by, for example, referring to information and expertise obtained while working in particular jobs – might also have been 'experienced' knowers. Figure 1.8 illustrates the split between comment-based posts, affirmative claims and counter-claims, while Figure 1.9 shows the balance of dominant versus negotiated/oppositional claims.

Figure 1.8 Breakdown of user posts by type (2,809)

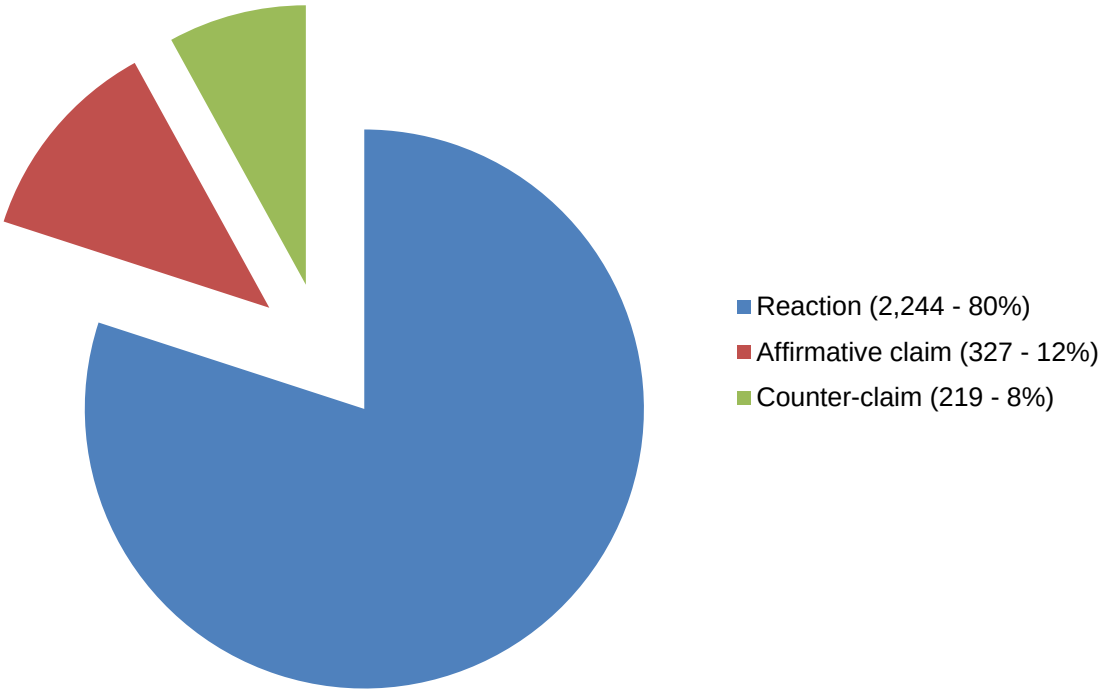
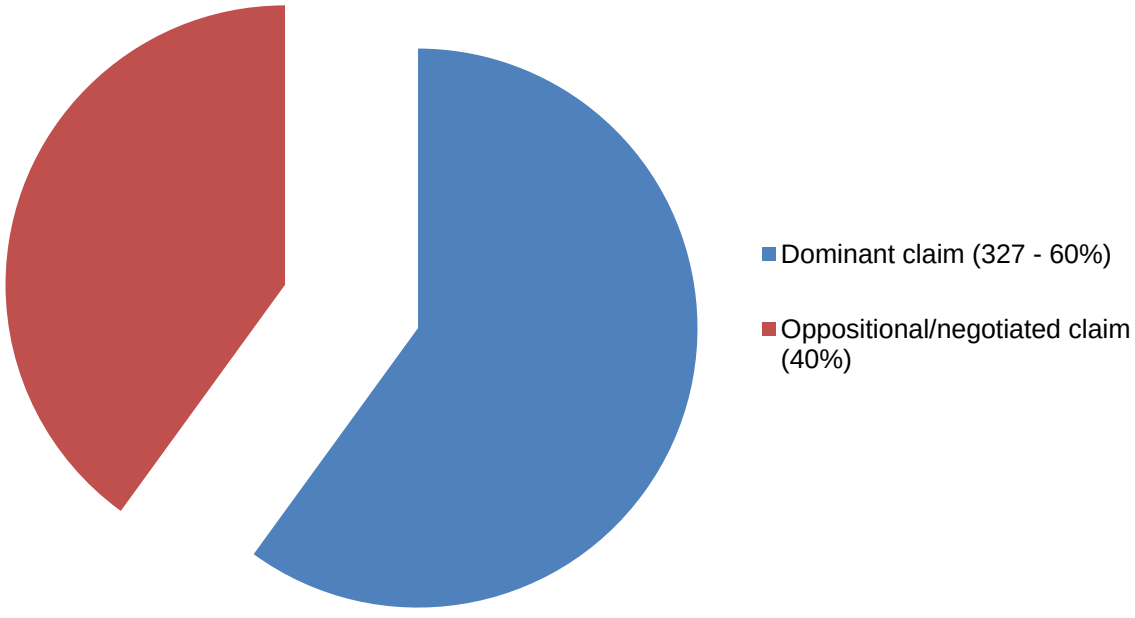


Figure 1.9 Breakdown of total claims (546)



Dominant claims-makers

Of the dominant claims identified a large number consisted of posts endorsing the (implicitly) critical framing of articles – for example, value-laden language and strongly worded intros/headlines used in stories about menacing children or those who menace them – by reference to the claims-makers' own experiences. A poster using the alias "aussiemaverick" responded to a July 26 *Independent* story about the Vatican's decision to withdraw its ambassador to Ireland following Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny's condemnation of its handling of a long-running controversy over paedophile priests with a comment drawing on a personal experience of being "physically and psychologically" abused by nuns at a Melbourne school. Likewise, "Ruth, Essex" posted on July 10 in support of the principal claims-makers (the Department for Education and an outspoken former deputy head-teacher) cited in a *Mail* story about a government decision to lift a ban on "touching" disruptive schoolchildren – a story that positioned unruly pupils as a feral menace - stating that she had given up teaching after 34 years due to a "breakdown" caused by parents' failure to discipline their deviant offspring.

Mail comment-threads tended to contain many posts in which (deserving) claims-makers referred to their own relatively 'poorer' positions compared to those of the (undeserving) protagonists of the accompanying articles. In two extensive pieces focusing on the aforementioned "mother-of-14", many of the 88 claims endorsing the *Mail*'s (critical) editorial line referred to their frustration and/or anger at being taxed to finance her lifestyle. "RB, Republic of Yorkshire" expressed disgust that he received the same income as her, despite working hard for a living and having higher outgoings, while self-

declared pensioner “smauriman, Gillingham Kent” contested a point made previously by “Richard, Bedford”, arguing that the woman’s children would be needed, as adults, to help pay for Britain’s ageing population. Smauriman’s issue was that, despite being retired, he was himself being taxed in the present to fund the benefits claimed by her brood. Intriguingly, though, one of the most enthusiastically disputed aspects of the dialogue surrounding this article related to what might be termed “negotiated” claims (Hall 1973). Though they mostly shared other readers’ disdain for the feckless “mother-of-14”, several posters pointed out that, far from being a burden on UK taxpayers (as was repeatedly suggested), she actually lived on Guernsey!

Oppositional claims-makers

A common characteristic of counter-claims posted in response to articles was their presentation of additional and/or contradictory ‘factual’ information (e.g. data or other acquired knowledge) that cast doubt on the validity of the journalists’ narratives. Some posters attempted to undermine or entirely debunk key aspects of certain articles. On July 26 “Christine, Newport” posted a comment on the *Mail* site countering the central claim(s) of a story headlined “Headmaster resigns after being suspended for 'manhandling' 8-year-old - despite pupil's family saying he did nothing wrong” – namely that teachers were barred from using physical force to protect themselves or other children against deviant classmates – by citing rules permitting the use of “appropriate restraint methods”. In a *Daily Telegraph* article on July 26 focusing on an initiative by then Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O’Donnell to promote happiness among children – another story in which the framing was skewed to implicitly position juveniles as ‘victims’ (this

time of bullying, exam stress, and various other latter-day pressures) - "susan t" reminded fellow posters that Britain's top civil servant had good cause to feel cheery himself, given that he earned ten times the national average salary.

Another common form of counter-claim was the post which *re*-presented facts contained (but usually buried) in the original articles - *emphasising* those details over ones fore-grounded by journalists, to contest the latter's framing of stories. In response to criticisms of the mother-of-14's single mum status, two posters drew attention to the fact that (as the article itself acknowledged) she had only *become* "single" three years earlier, when her husband left her. An extension of the idea of re-presenting information downplayed in an article to provide a contrasting emphasis was the attention drawn by some posters to stories published elsewhere on the same websites whose narratives contradicted those in the piece under discussion. In the case of the "mother-of-14", a poster styling him/herself "AF, UK" noted the following on July 11:

"The UK has a rapidly ageing population and this paper has repeatedly raised concerns about the falling birth rate among white, educated people and compared it to the higher birth levels in other cultural backgrounds in the UK. If the middle class aren't going to have the children...the working class may as well fill the gap. You will be grateful for these 14 healthy, clean and english [sic] children when you are older…"

Perhaps the most persuasive counter-claims, however, were the small but significant minority arising out of posters' professed experiences. A July 30 *Telegraph* story reviving familiar concerns about the nefarious influence of magazine depictions of physical beauty on girls with eating disorders (children as victim) was countered by two posters who

claimed to have had anorexia and were less than sympathetic to fellow sufferers who blamed their conditions on media portrayals of idealised body-types. Similarly oppositional claims appeared in response to a July 20 *Telegraph* article concerning the expulsion of three 'deviant' pupils from exclusive public school Bedales over an alleged sex scandal – with alumni, other privately educated posters and a former staff member uniting to defend the institution on the basis of their positive experiences of independent schooling.

Of all the counter claims-making noted, though, the most powerful was that posted in opposition to a story the *Mail* ran on July 10, focusing on allegations that a "gang" of travellers or Gypsies (specified as boys and men) had callously drowned a pony in a lake. The *Mail*'s version of this widely reported tale of juvenile corruption and deviancy – headlined "Gang 'deliberately drowned' pony in lake in front of horrified families" – attracted 216 posts. Stripping out the 204 (largely condemnatory) *comments* on the alleged crime, 12 posts contained claims by people purporting to hold informed views on the subject. Of these eight were counter-claims – outnumbering those 'supporting' the *Mail* narrative two to one. The counter claims-makers who drew on unspecified background knowledge about travellers and/or horses to bolster their criticisms of the *Mail's* line included "Polly, Yorkshire", who disputed the likelihood of travellers abandoning the pony's trap and tackle (as the story stated), given the cost of this equipment, and "horace4831, Gravesend, Kent", who contrasted the paper's description of events with the BBC's version of the story, which made "no mention of them [the culprits] being Gypsies". But most noteworthy was a post by "John, Reading", which mounted a wholesale contradiction of key claims in the report. In a counter-claim positioning his "friend" as a direct protagonist in the events reported, he wrote:

"This story is awfully inaccurate and rather spiteful, bordering on racism. I spoke to a friend who works at the lake, teaching sailing, last night and he told me the horses were taken into the water to cool off after a hot ride...The member of public who went to hospital sustained his injuries from several kicks to the head from the HORSE [sic] he tried to rescue. I know this because my friend jumped out of his boat and pulled him out of the water. It was a terrible accident, nothing sinister and the owners of the pony are guilty of stupidity, leaving the scene of an incident and not being compassionate but they are certainly not guilty of deliberately trying to drown their ponies. If you want to check this out, telephone Hawley Lakes Sailing Club, they will confirm this story…"

Here, then, we have a firm (if small-scale) demonstration of counter claims-making on online discussion-threads as civic empowerment: a re-framing of the overarching construction placed by a newspaper website on a specific 'event'. By posting a counter-claim that authoritatively contradicted the original narrative, "John, Reading" singlehandedly altered the final form that narrative took.

Conclusion: online newspaper claims-making and the new public sphere

Despite its limited scope, this chapter offers a glimpse of the possibilities presented by emerging sites of claims-making and counter claims-making on online newspaper discussion-boards. More work needs to be done to illuminate this new realm of social construction (and deconstruction), embracing wider definitions of user-generated content to demonstrate how grassroots claims-makers and, particularly, counter claims-makers might harness the 'virtual public sphere' to contest and/or re-frame otherwise hegemonic

narratives (Gramsci 1971) - and to explore more fully how some may already be doing so.

But why should we be excited by the possibilities presented by social media as unsophisticated as newspaper discussion-threads? Quite simply, because of the potential they offer for promoting civic empowerment. The seeds of this can be glimpsed, however modestly, in many of the online dialogues cited here. Witschge (2005, 2006) has noted how limited are the number of 'voices' present even on lengthy newspaper discussion-threads – while recent studies focusing on the (politically) self-selecting nature of audiences for specific media (Iyengar and Khan 2009) suggest that the *range*, as well as number, of perspectives they present is likely to remain narrow for now. Nonetheless, though the handful of counter claims-makers daring to stick their heads above the parapet on *www.dailymail.co.uk* may well represent only a tiny minority (defenders of the faith might venture to brand them "trolls" - Binns 2012), they are individuals who have moved beyond being news 'consumers' by taking the time to comment on - and even contribute to - news narratives. In a growing number of cases, like that of "John, Reading", they are bringing new and/or contrary information to the table that would otherwise be absent from an article and its comment trail. And, while their words may be read by only a handful of others, where they put their counter-arguments persuasively and back them up with evidence it is surely possible for them to impact on the overall 'reader experience'.

As Habermas (1996) emphasised in relation to the social and political forces that successfully counteracted establishment narratives in the late 20th century – notably the movements against global poverty and atomic energy – it is often grassroots claims-makers (you and me) who bring big issues to the world's attention. Is it so fanciful to

envisage a time when posts on the *Guardian'*s "Comment is Free" – or even the *Daily Star*'s "Your Shout" - are alerting us to the era-defining injustices of tomorrow?

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